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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### GRAFFITI AS ALTERNATIVE COMMUNICATION TOOLS: DISCUSSIONS OF VANDALISM AND THE EFFECTS OF NEW MEDIA

Dr. Eser Keçeci

Arkin University of Creative Arts and Design.

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#### Abstract

Since their appearance on the streets as alternative communication tools in 1980s, graffiti have led to controversies over their conceptualization as vandalism of the public property. Despite this negative understanding, however, graffiti are tools through which minorities and marginalized groups are able to represent themselves and express their voices in public spheres. Thus, graffiti are turning into alternative and protest tools of communication. Today, through the possibilities that new media and especially social media offer, the lost voices are disseminated faster through graffiti and therefore, graffiti are transformed into more effective communication channels. While acknowledging the yet ongoing vandalistic approach to graffiti, this study contributes theoretically, through a qualitative method of analysis, to the theories on graffiti by offering a discussion on how new media affects the dissemination and conceptualization of graffiti. The analysis and conclusive discussions suggest that despite the negative conceptualization of graffiti as a vandalistic act, they have been utilized as alternative communication tools and are reached by a huge number of audiences through their dissemination by new media even after their actual disappearance from the street walls.

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#### Introduction:-

During the last decade, Graffiti and street art have received more academic attentions “from a wide range of fields including art history, criminology/criminal justice, cultural studies, rhetoric, and political science” (Ross, Bengtsenc, Lennond, & Phillips, 2017, s. 413). This visibility is not limited to scientific sphere as graffiti recently are being received well by the huge number of audiences through their dissemination in social media.

While approaching graffiti as a research subject within historical process, it is important to do it within modern art history, political history and cultural history. First of all, the question of how the aesthetic values and concerns were filtered by the evolution and modernization of classical art and even its tendency towards postmodern processes, in which way graffiti (which are deemed vandalistic by a large segment of society) would be perceived as art, is an issue that needs to be examined within the history of art. It is also known that graffiti, which are practiced illegally in public spaces due to their protesting and anarchic nature, have been utilized with military or social causes in the history of world politics (Ivanova, 2013). For these reasons, graffiti should be studied within political history as well. Being an expressive reflection of marginalized Afro-Americans living in America, the hip hop culture should be considered within cultural history which examines the cultural and intellectual characteristics of societies. So, this

Corresponding Author: Dr. Eser Keçeci

Address:- Arkin University of Creative Arts and Design.

Hip-Hop culture, which is composed of rap music, break-dance and graffiti, should be analyzed within the cultural history (Lannert, 2015).

With reference to the abundance of studies carried out on these aforementioned fields, this study examines how the illegal graffiti became legalized, and also transformed into works of art that created means for alternative and protest communication in the historical process of new media.

In the first place, the reasons for graffiti being generally deemed as an act of vandalism in society are discussed; afterwards, the entrance of graffiti into the norms of the public conscience by being universalized in media, and its transformation into the most effective artistic tool of communication for self-induced public resistances are illustrated with examples from around the world.

### **Graffiti: Vandalism or Art**

Etymologically, the word 'vandal' originated from French. Being in use since the early ages, it is still used in great issues fought over in cities. Turkish Language Association defines the word based on its past and present meanings; "an East Germanic tribe which lived in the early years of the Common Era and became notorious for its mercilessness in its wars against the Roman Empire", "A person or a group that burns down ancient cultural and artistic monuments and is not able to appreciate them" (Türk Dil Kurumu, 2017). Vandalism, on the other hand, can be defined as inclinations towards vandal activities and behaviors.

Labeled as 'acts of destruction', vandalism is generally described as damaging public property or spaces, or as destructive attitudes and acts towards private property belonging to a person the actor does not personally know. The vandal does this deliberately and is conscious of the damage towards public or private property (Özen, 2004, s. 144-145). "Vandalism is an issue that has attracted the attention of researchers especially in developed countries like the US, England and Sweden since the 60s, and more importantly has social, psychological, economic and legal aspects." (Kesimli, 2013)

The vandalistic perspective on graffiti is manifested in the way graffiti is associated with Broken Window Theory (Eyck, 2016). In this regard, graffiti are seen as one among lengthier chain of subtle crimes which can lead into more serious crimes, "theorizing that crime emanated from disorder and that if disorder were eliminated, then serious crimes would not occur" (McKee, 2013). That's why in the 1970's, when the State of New Jersey designed a program "safe and clean neighbourhoods" to increase the social life standards in 28 cities, they started dealing with small crimes which were considered to lead inevitably into more serious crimes (Kelling & Wilson, 1982). Accordingly, graffiti have been illegal since their birth; writers were sometimes arrested as vandals, charged with fines, or had to participate in cleansing streets from graffiti as part of community sentences (Gomez, 1993, s. 173-174) (Figure 1). Graffiti is still perceived as vandalism in a lot of American cities, and the same law and criminal actions are enforced (Eickmier, 2017).



**Figure 1:-** A graffiti painted by Banksy, teasing the city authorities that dedicated themselves to cleaning the tags.

Source: <https://www.widewalls.ch/is-graffiti-art-or-vandalism/>

Besides the visual hazard that vandalism causes by damaging parks, gardens, monuments and artistic works in public spaces and trashing walls with paints, the economic demolition that it imposes on states is also a great issue that especially the developed countries should deal with.

Being a tool of communication and identity for youngsters, graffiti emerged as a response to social discrimination, especially the conflict between the authorities and the writers. Eickmier provides an example of this exhausting conflict in

<sup>i</sup>New York subway station in which the writers, among whom a strong rivalry emerged, were concerned with painting the best graffiti that they could and thrusting themselves to the forefront in spite of all the risks. According to a notice published by New York City Transit Authorities in 1984, 80% of subway trains were covered with graffiti, and this was rendered as an indication that the control of the city was lost. Immediately after that, the state authorities started campaigns in order to take the control back, clean the city and regain the trains. In the middle of 1989, it was announced that the New York City subway system was cleansed from graffiti (Eickmier, 2017).

Based on the above-mentioned discussion, there is a dominating prejudice that a densely-tagged<sup>ii</sup> neighborhood is probably a neglected place or occupied by criminals or street gangs. Graffiti can also lead commercial and retail fields to see little traffic or the real estate value of a place to decrease. Thus, a lot of cities have adopted a zero-tolerance policy towards all kinds of illegal street art forms and formed graffiti task forces in order to fight their growth (Eickmier, 2017).

The conceptualization of graffiti as forms of vandalism and destruction came into question when they found artistic values through considering graffiti works as works of arts, being exhibited in art exhibitions and find their ways to art galleries. Whether or not a piece of work is an artistic work, is one of the most conventional and controversial questions for all kinds of newly-emerged art forms. Graffiti encountered the same question. In this context, only graffiti that can be deemed as phenomenal works of the post-70s era are taken into account. Of course, just as every oil painting made cannot be considered as art, it cannot be also said that every one of graffiti carries artistic qualifications. Even some graffiti practicing groups criticize some graffiti due to their non-creative characteristics (Figure2).



**Figure2:** An example of a building stained with graffiti. Photo: Casey Kellbaugh, New York Times.

Source: <https://www.widewalls.ch/is-graffiti-art-or-vandalism/>

The signifying factor for whether graffiti are accepted as an art form or not is their permitted or prohibited practice. Defined as ‘an act involving deliberate damage to or destruction of public or private property’, graffiti were also seen as a reductive art form in themselves. The real question that needs to be asked here is whether they are really a sort of destruction or not (Kordic, 2015). When astonishing graffiti are made on the city walls, it is generally well



received. But they are either erased or covered with paint since they are deemed illegal by authorities and are perceived as forms of vandalism.

On the other side, legal or permitted graffiti can be evaluated as artistic works. In addition, they can get a chance to be exhibited in the most prestigious museums and become a respectable art form when made on canvases or portable boards instead of walls. For example, important artists like Banksy and Shepard Fairey earn a considerable amount of money from their artistic works, besides the magnificent worldwide success they have attained with their works displayed on the walls of several museums and galleries (Kordic, 2015).

Therefore, at this point, the key element in classifying graffiti, a branch of street art<sup>iii</sup>, as vandalism is related to their practice areas, characteristics and permission, rather than their techniques and methods.

Nowadays, several city art festivals and workshops are held where graffiti, which can be viewed as the voice of youth and the transformation of the gray architectural texture of the cities, are encouraged (Friedmann, 1961, s. 57). These events beautify the environment with extraordinary artistic works. Cities and neighborhoods such as Stockholm (Figure 3) and Brooklyn Bushwick (Figure 4) have the most famous legal graffiti wall areas. In addition, it is known that big companies like Red Bull, Adidas and 55DSL cooperate professionally with graffiti experts in their advertising campaigns (Kordic, 2015).



**Figure 3:** A legal creation of graffiti in Stockholm

Source: <https://www.widewalls.ch/is-graffiti-art-or-vandalism/>



**Figure 4:** The legal graffiti area in New York, Brooklyn Bushwick

Source: <https://www.6sqft.com/5pointz-artists-sue-developer-for-whitewashing-iconic-graffiti-facade/>

Consequently, it has been understood that one of the main reasons for graffiti to be rendered as acts of vandalism is that they are practiced outdoors without any legal permission. However, in spite of permitted and legal areas, the young practicing population still creates their wonderful artistic works on city walls without legal permission, claiming their own share of the cities. Another factor for graffiti to be classified as vandalism, besides damaging the public property, is that what people see reflected on the walls are generally doodles without any artistic or creative quality.

### **New Media and Graffiti**

The history of graffiti dates back to very ancient times. Archaeologists define the murals that were found on Pompeii and even Roman catacombs<sup>iv</sup> as graffiti. It is thought that one of the main reasons for archaeologists to call these paintings graffiti is that graffiti were used as a means of correspondence (Lannert, 2015), just like their usage as an alternative communication tool in our day. It is possible to support this claim with graffiti found on the Berlin Wall and in 1968 events in France.

Starting rather as a political statement, the adventure of graffiti had completely gained its contemporary graffiti art form by the 1980s. The artists now viewed the street as “a place for art”. Graffiti got more and more colorful and spread from the city walls and subway stations in America throughout the world (Belge & Futtu, 2014).

Thus, graffiti started to spread throughout the world as a form of communication for contemporary art, as well as being the voice of the opponent art. The graffiti writers and their works have been covered in papers and news, whether positively or negatively; while there were programs and columns that ran a smear campaign against graffiti

on television and in papers, there were also programs that researched graffiti and emphasized their protesting aspects. For instance, according to data attained from the official website of the New York Times newspaper, the number of texts written about graffiti between 1967 and 2017 is 852 (Table 1).

**Table 1:-** The number of articles about graffiti published on the New York Times newspaper from 1967 to 2017 with respective year ranges.

Year range	Number of articles
1967-1970	7 articles
1970-1980	77 articles
1980-1990	153 articles
1990-2000	176 articles
2000-2010	211 articles
2010-2017	242 articles

As can be understood from the table, in every ten years, the number of articles about graffiti increased. The positive and negative mentions of graffiti on one of the most prestigious newspapers possessing one of the highest circulations in America (The New York Times, 1998) made them popular and visible more than ever. Eyck studies US news coverage of graffiti in 2012 in order to shed light on the way graffiti is represented in a public spaces. The findings indicate that mostly graffiti is framed as a crime; the conceptualization which is in line with the broken window theory (Eyck, 2016, s. 220).

There was an incident which has changed the public attitude toward graffiti drastically. In 1983, a 25-year-old youth, Michael Steward was beaten and put into a coma after being arrested by officers and died 13 days later. After a judicial process that lasted for more than a year, the officers were tried and found guilty by the judge. The youth's death as a result of the incidents after being arrested while making graffiti at the railway station was followed closely not only by the graffiti community but also by the media including New York Times (Wilkerson, 1985), and the issue remained on the agenda for a long time. The conclusion of the case in favor of the youth affected the graffiti community positively in the context of social interaction.

Graffiti are viewed as a form of protest and activist art. When creating their artistic works in the street, activist artists do care more about conveying their concerns to the masses, rather than the form it might have (Truman, 2010, s. 1-2). Accordingly, the writers are able to make their messages heard worldwide through communication tools, especially with the opportunities that new media technologies provide for them.

The sustainability of the given message and its long-lasting effects are the issues that activist artists are concerned about. Both the sustainability of the artistic work and its message and the purpose to reach the whole world has made new media a suitable communicating tool for activist artists. Playing a vital role in the democratization of information, these tools are also useful in spreading the critical perspective towards the dominative system (Baranseli, 2017, s. 271).

Thus, the most important tools helping activist art to be seen, shared and sustained are new media. Through benefiting from new media, graffiti, which are deemed illegal, are enabled to stay permanent and spread their ideas to huge number of audiences.

Just as the materials, techniques and perceptions of art have changed by means of technology throughout history, the agents that spread art to the audiences have changed as well. For example, with the advent of photography, the subjective interpretation superseded the objective interpretation in artistic works, and this directed the aesthetic path towards conceptual art. Therefore, the message a work of art convey gets more importance than the mere material aspect of it.

The world is becoming rapidly globalized; all aspects of human life, including our social interactions have been affected by the rapid globalizing changes, esp. with the invention of new media<sup>v</sup>. New media plays an important role in social and democratic conversions in a world that is globalizing with the help of technology. The presence of new media has been the most important disseminator of the marginalized voices rising in societies, and has often contributed to the conversion of social movements. "Thanks to new media, different segments of society have started to utilize these channels to express their disturbances. This has sometimes enabled them to make their voices

heard by political authorities, and at other times provided them the means to be organized.” (Karagöz, 2013, s. 131). Besides, pluralistic democracy has been supported through these means, and these new channels have provided a tool for minorities, those neglected by the system and the opponent communities, to make their voices heard.

In this context, not being able to occupy a place in the mainstream media, the activist groups started to use social networks and the internet. In an effort to make their protesting voices heard, graffiti, one of the most significant representatives of activist art in contemporary societies, are reached by millions of people through several shares in the social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Pinterest. Consequently, people that come together in this way form a new virtual public space.

The works, which have been created during rebellions and social movements that have still been continuing in the Arab World since the 2010s, provide us with an example of reaching to such public spaces. Street art, graffiti and calligraphy are among the most striking and most creative communication tools used during Arab Spring in order to convey the opposing messages to the society. The lyrics of several songs and poems that were once only known by intellectuals started to be known by ordinary people and used as the protesters’ slogans. The Tunisian poet Aboul-Qacem Echebbi (1909-1934), the Egyptian poets Fouad Negm (1929-2013) and Abdel Rahman el-Abnudi (1938-2015), the expression that the Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser was “the leader and teacher of the people” (*al sha’bhuwa al qa’idwalmu’allim*), and the song “LeI Sabr Hedod” (Patience has limits) by the famous Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum (1898-1975) are among the important examples. All these slogans and more were visualized on the buildings (I Naguib, 2016) and were shared in social media and internet platforms (Figures 5 and 6). This conversion of a heritage composed of words and lyrics into perceptibly, strikingly and politically strong visuals was provided by graffiti. Even though they have been erased from the walls as of today, it is still possible to come across the same visuals through internet platforms, as segments of an immaterial culture.



**Figure 5:-** Omar Fathy aka Picasso, *Illi Kalif Ma Matsh* (The one who delegates doesn't die), with the poem “Oh! Regime you are afraid of the brush and the pen.” 2012, Cairo,

Source: <http://heiup.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/index.php/transcultural/article/view/23590/17362>.





**Figure 6:-** Bahia Shehab, *You May Crush the Flowers, But You Cannot Delay the Spring* (verse by poet Pablo Neruda), 2011. Cairo. Calligraffiti.

**Source:** <http://heiup.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/index.php/transcultural/article/view/23590/17362>

The internet enables not only the producer, but also the fan of an artistic work to use it to a large extent, since it is a communication tool that can be reached from anywhere in the world. As the internet is getting more accessible around the globe, everything which was previously in physical format has become portable to the internet. Being the fastest tool to share and receive any form of information and knowledge, the internet also plays an extremely active role in explaining, defining and spreading contemporary art.

Forexample, the messages that the Tunisian graffiti artist EL Seed gave to the world through his peace-oriented works have earned him a place among the most well-known graffiti artists in our day. He forms his works by combining the Arabic alphabet with contemporary graffiti art, calling it 'calligraffiti'<sup>vi</sup>. He created works that carry the hopes for peace on a lot of walls from the slums in Rio de Janeiro to the bridges in Paris (Eng, 2015).

The artist explains how his life changed and his works spread worldwide through the usage of the internet;

People started to share my works on social media. And so I started to be followed. As I participated in street art festivals, I published the photos of my works on the online websites of museums and associations. I once uploaded a photo of one of my works on the Facebook page of the Museum of Islamic Art in Qatar. After a few years, they got into contact with me and told me that they did not know who I was, but they found my work on their photo gallery and they wanted to create a project with me (Eng, 2015).

After such events as this, while the artist spread his peaceful messages throughout the world, he also became a phenomenon, and started to make his living from the calligraffiti that he created (Figure 7).



**Figure 7:-** A graffiti created by EL Seed giving messages of hope and inspiration. London. Photo: Michael Brydon  
**Source:**<https://blog.ted.com/el-seed-uses-calligraffiti-to-transcend-language/>

Quite successful street art that the street artists created during the Gezi Park protests in Taksim, Istanbul, in 2013 should also be acknowledged (Figures 8-10). Protest graffiti towards the government were also among these works. These graffiti spread through new media during such protests, transforming into a branch of social resistance and set an example for the new social movements<sup>vii</sup> that the whole world supports. Demands for cultural and social identity lie on the basis of these movements. The Gezi Park protesters had initially aimed to stop the building of a shopping centre by cutting down the trees inside the park. But afterwards, it turned into a movement in which all the communities opposing the government came together and called for the government's resignation. Therefore, the unrest which was started with environmentalist objectives, turned into a revolutionary movement. Just like in the Arab Spring, the main communication tool was new media during the Gezi Park unrest (Bayhan, 2014)

The internet, social media, websites, Twitter, Facebook, and mobile phones were the main tools of organizing and corresponding in both the Gezi Park protests and the movements happening in the European countries, the USA and the Arab Spring since 2011. The most determinant characteristic of postmodern movements is the intense and active use of the internet. (Bayhan, 2014)



**Figure 8:** A work of graffiti made during the Gezi Park protests in Taksim, including the words “We don’t want a prime minister that has a fascist mind day and night – The Jolly High Youth”, with a picture of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.



Source:<https://www.facebook.com/geziparkidirenisi/photos/a.391298784321869.1073741842.390109394440808/391298810988533/?type=3&theater>



**Figure 9:-**A work of graffiti made during the Gezi Park Protests in Taksim, including the words “TOMA-Water-Pepper-Orange” (a reference to BarışManço song “DomatesBiberPatlican (Tomato, Pepper and Eggplant)”, with also references to the armored vehicles [TOMA], water cannons, pepper gas and agent orange used during the protests), with a picture of BarışManço, a Turkish rock singer.

**Source:**<https://www.facebook.com/geziparkidirenisi/photos/a.391298784321869.1073741842.390109394440808/393925947392486/?type=3&theater>



**Figure 10:-**A work of graffiti made during the Gezi Park Protests in Taksim, including the words “Liar Media”, referencing the media bosses.

**Source:**<https://www.facebook.com/geziparkidirenisi/photos/a.391298784321869.1073741842.390109394440808/391299540988460/?type=3&theater>

This research chooses Facebook as the most commonly used social media in order to have a short quantitative inquiry into the distribution and dissemination of graffiti in figures 8, 9, and 10 on social media. The graffiti in Figure 8 was shared 757 times on Facebook, and received 1900 likes on Gezi Park protests page. The BarışManço graffiti in Figure 9 was liked by 1400 people on the same page, and was shared 940 times. Lastly, the graffiti in Figure 10, with the ‘Liar Media’ slogan, likewise made during the Gezi Park protests and this time directly targeting the media, was shared 175 times and liked by 750 people. In this way, even though the Taksim Square and its streets have been cleansed from these graffiti, the traces of this intellectual resistance against the government can be witnessed with graffiti visuals on social media.

Besides all these, there are applications<sup>viii</sup> designed to show places where graffiti are created in cities. There are also some special applications unique to a particular street artist. The common aspect of these applications is to spread the street art and its messages to larger masses by enabling the created works to be seen by the whole world.

It is thought that the term ‘global village’, first used by Marshall McLuhan in a text he wrote in 1962, is of vital importance for understanding the place that the new communication technologies occupy in our lives” (Karagöz, 2013). The general reason for graffiti, a branch of activist art, to be created is to convey the marginalized ideas, messages, and concerns to the whole world, besides artistic reasons.

### Conclusion:-

The controversy over graffiti separated the approaches to this newly-emerged aesthetic form into those who reject graffiti as form of vandalism and those who appreciate them as new forms of art with their special techniques, purposes, audiences and way of presentation. This ongoing debate has direct influence on the way graffiti are being treated in contemporary urban areas; some are embraced by art communities, being exhibited in galleries and museums. Some are considered as forms of damages to public properties and neglecting authorities as they are

created with no permission and they connote the insecurity of the urban areas. This interpretation leads into conceptualization of graffiti as a form of slight crime which can create more serious crimes. That's why most of these graffiti are doomed to deletion and destruction. In addition, the uncontrolled presence of aesthetically less valuable works on the streets causes graffiti not to be accepted and embraced, and exposes them to negative criticisms and removal.

New media provide graffiti artists, whose works have been exposed to the risk of destruction and elimination, with a new platform to disseminate their works more rapidly to huge number of audiences even after their disappearance from the urban walls. This new possibility encourages more artists to employ graffiti as tools for aesthetic and intellectual reflections, and leads into emergence of phenomenal artists in this field. These artists not only have the opportunity to exhibit their works for a larger group of audiences, but also benefit from the fame and new source of income that new media offer them; profitable advertising campaigns of big companies and running online sales are just two examples among many.

While the traditional media provide audiences with a one-way transmission of media content, the new media offer a revolutionary possibility to connect the producers and users of the media content. This is what Bruns (Bruns, 2007) called produsage; the kind of user-led content creation which is just actualized through the new media. This new form of produsage offers opportunities to masses to express their protest towards social authorities, taboos and sanctions, and to share widely their videos and artistic activities with society.

The new media play an active role in the elimination of vandalistic graffiti, and the conceptualization of graffiti as alternative means of communicating protest and art. Social networks, websites, video games and video-based contents turn to the ultimate channels in which graffiti are being shared and viewed by audiences. Consequently, graffiti are becoming legalized and accepted as forms of art.

Based on the discussion this research offers, it can be claimed that graffiti can spread throughout the world and reach larger number of audiences through new media, even though their physical presence in public spaces does not last forever. Therefore, it can be said that new media is the ultimate channel for graffiti to maintain their lives. The fact that graffiti can reach a large number of audiences rapidly through new media has increased the number of graffiti artists. Therefore, graffiti have transformed into popular expressive artistic missionaries. Being in the public eye and so intensely shared, graffiti are being developed with different techniques and styles by each particular artist and continue to be used as a protest tool of communication with more innovative and unique interpretations.

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#### End Notes:-

<sup>i</sup>Writers: People who make graffiti

<sup>ii</sup>Tag: Graffiti that contain the nickname of the writer

<sup>iii</sup>Infact, street art is defined as post-graffiti in some sources. For more information, see also (Dickens, 2015).

<sup>iv</sup>A name given to subterranean graves that the early Christians made (Türk Dil Kurumu, 2017). Also catacombs, generally found in Rome, are vaulted underground structures that were used in a period when Christianity was forbidden and practiced in secret.

<sup>v</sup> New media is defined as networked, dense and interactive technologies open to manipulation, covering the internet, web, computerized multimedia, video games, CD-ROMs and DVDs, and television programs, magazines, books and movies which have the characteristic of numerical interactions (Lister, 2003, s. 2-9).

<sup>vi</sup> No information has been attained from the dictionary scans made for this word, but it can be interpreted as a name that the artist in question gave to his works combining graffiti and calligraphy.

<sup>vii</sup>“The protests against globalization, starting with the ‘Battle of Seattle’ in 1999, are important protests in terms of the new social movements. Organizing through national and international networks, these movements concentrate on a concrete problem. Since they are decentralized, disorganized and non-ideological, they develop as spontaneous protests. Starting against neoliberal policies, this new protest form was seen during the ‘Occupy’ movements, colorful revolutions and the Arab Spring, with the same patterns” (Bayhan, 2014).

<sup>viii</sup> Graffiti in several metropolises and their locations are shown on maps in applications such as Street Art Rome, Tokyo Street Art Treasure Map, Street Art Istanbul, Streetartvisor and Street Art Spotter on, and the person downloading the app can upload new graffiti with their locations. There are also applications showing the locations



of the works of Banksy with their visuals, with 'Banksy London Tour' being premium, and 'Banksy Street Art Treasure Map' being free.